

T H E S I S O N

THE INFLUENCE OF UNCONSCIOUS SUGGESTION IN THE

PRACTICE OF MEDICINE

by

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As a specific curative agent suggestion has received considerable attention, but so far as I am aware, its unconscious use has not received the consideration it deserves, nor has a proper estimate of its far reaching influence been formed by the profession. Its effects enter into all our remedial measures, misleading our judgement thereof by imposing results which we erroneously attribute to other agencies.

The effect of mind on body must have increased parri passu with the development of the mind. When the brain advanced beyond the stage of being a simple reflex centre and became capable of memorising the influence of mind would begin to make itself felt. How far down in the animal kingdom this influence first begins it is impossible to determine, as its first manifestations must be infinitesimal and inappreciable; but among the higher vertebrates its effects are frequently to be observed. For example a horse will sweat and tremble from fear; a rabbit will die after receiving a severe fright; some dogs micturate with joy or fear, others have been said to die of 'broken hearts'; all going to show the profound effect of mind, sufficient even to cause death.

In man the body is subjected to a much higher degree of mentality and during consciousness may be said to be completely dominated. We may readily observe the effects of some of the more pronounced mental influences such as, blushing, fainting, diuresis, diaphoresis &c; and it is fair to assume that the body responds in some way to the slighter influences as well, although the results may not be appreciable to us. In other words the body reacts to every, even passing, phase of the mind.

The effects of body on mind are not less certain. An impoverished or poisoned blood supply to the brain, or painful stimuli will induce a corresponding mental aberration. Many cases of insanity are due to somatic disease. One can understand from this mutual action and reaction how a vicious circle may be established and conditions such as neurasthenia and hypochondriasis brought about. The stimuli from the specialised senses (eye, ear &c) and generalized senses (skin, muscles, tendons &c) may act simply reflexly or they may be transmitted to the higher centres for judgement --- that is, compared with former experiences --- and energy is directed in accordance with this. From disease or lack of experience the mind may err and misdirected energy, or inhibition of energy, is the result. For example, a person may see some natural object but the mind misconceiving the sensory impression recalls the physical condition associated with supernatural things --- dilated abdominal vessels, blanched face and brain and muscular weakness and all the phenomena of fear. So

emotions such as fear may be the outcome of the bodily condition engendered --- be the result not the cause of them. Although it is necessary to refer to mind and body as if they were separate entities, it does not convey a correct impression of their relationship. Mind is simply the outcome of the functioning of the brain, just as the secretion of bile is due to the activity of the liver, and the health of the whole organism is equally dependent upon the healthy action of each part.

Normally the conditions that make for elevation rather than depression are greatly predominant. The mind reflects in its state the various stimuli which influence it, but pleasurable sensations outbalance their opponents, and healthy tissues and *la joie de vivre* are the natural results. The tendency of the body to recover is the direct outcome of the normal mental state, and it is equally correct to speak of the *vis medicatrix animae*. The effects of grief and pain are usually transitory and the reaction from them may be enhanced by the contrast. But when mental depression is prolonged or pain persistent the bodily condition rapidly deteriorates, its resistance is lessened and it falls an easy victim to the attacks of disease.

It is not only to the particular state of mind which it induces but also to its persistence that suggestion owes its effects. Suggestion instils into the mind a belief or idea which becomes fixed for a longer or shorter period, and which may be true or false, and which is not

dependent upon but rides superior to reason and experience. It dominates the individual while it lasts, and its effects may be manifested, for good or evil, morally, intellectually or physically. In every remedial measure the suggestion is given the patient that he is going to benefit therefrom, and, depending on the receptivity of the mind and the strength of the suggestion, in other words the personality and enthusiasm of the suggestor, benefit will result whatever other agent be employed. In ordinary medical practice the power of suggestion is invoked unconsciously but it is none the less potent and its effects must be discounted in estimating the results of remedies. In the vast majority of cases the equation works out:- remedy — suggestion = nil. The medical practitioner has been accustomed to denounce wholesale the faith-curer and all his ways, and the mere mention of psychological influences as therapeutical agents stinks to him as heresy. He is reluctantly constrained, however, to acknowledge that benefit may accrue from the use of suggestion in functional cases, and readily attributes the results achieved by quacks and patent medicines to this cause; but what he does not so readily admit is that his own results are largely due to the same agency and in all probability would deprecate any such insinuation. In the days when ignorance of the structure and function of the body prevailed, spells and charms were chiefly utilized in the cure of diseases and, without doubt, utilized with good effect in many cases. In these days of experiment

and striving to reduce every process to exact science the pendulum has swung too much in the opposite direction, and the tendency is to ignore psychological influence, or, at least, to look upon it as something apart and not to be taken into account in practical medicine. The following instances, which might be multiplied indefinitely, will serve to shew how the mental factor must be considered in all our dealings with patients if any exactitude is to be arrived at in our conclusions.

In the days when bleeding was practised, it must have been used to the bodily injury of the patient in most cases, and yet its use was continued for a long period by intelligent men capable of acutely observing the signs of health and disease. In 1890 when Tuberculin treatment was first introduced, doctors, patients and onlookers were completely deceived as to its effects on phthisis. Koch reported that,* "as a rule the number of bacilli decreased and in many cases disappeared The night sweats ceased, the patients' appearance improved, and they increased in weight. Within four to six weeks patients under treatment in the first stage of phthisis were all free from every symptom and might be pronounced cured. Patients with cavities not yet too highly developed improved considerably and were almost cured These experiences lead me to suppose that phthisis in the beginning can be cured with certainty by this remedy." And this opinion of Koch's was confirmed by doctors all

over the world. Dr Philips qualified his approbation: **
 "I observed a number of cases, where night sweats has disappeared, where the cough was practically gone, and where the patients' subjective condition was better, and a few where there was a gain in several pounds in weight. In very few cases was I able to trace important improvement in the physical signs." It was some time before the profession awakened to the fact that the Tuberculin not only did not benefit pulmonary tuberculosis but actually hastened the process.

In text books of medicine long lists of drugs are given for the treatment of various diseases, the mere multiplicity of which demonstrates their individual inutility. There is not one drug in hundreds which ultimately realizes the estimate first formed of it. It only requires to be given with sufficient assurance to act like a 'charm'. A few years of medical practice suffice to shew how ephemeral are the vogues in treatment; how they are set up with assurance, then assailed with the shafts of doubt and finally tumbled into the limbo of useless things.

How is it then that so many misconceptions arise ? How is it that careful observers advocate therapeutical agents which are afterwards found to be absolutely worthless ? The one and only explanation is to be found in the Pucklike activity of suggestion touching the minds of patients and doctors alike. The former's mind is inspired by the idea of recovery and his tissues respond to it. The

latter sees the results, coloured in addition by his own fervid frame of mind, and ascribes them to any agency but the right one. In the instances I have given there was real benefit to the patients, not imaginary; the perfectly healthy man was all the better of his Spring phlebotomy; the consumptive's general condition improved, his tissue resistance was increased, and the morbid process perhaps for a time held at bay; every drug enshrined in our list of therapeutical agents no doubt yielded satisfactory evidence of its efficacy to some observer, although, with most of them, amulets are equally deserving of the distinction.

I wish to emphasize the fact that mental effects are manifested not only functionally but organically. But in order to bring about organic changes the effect must be prolonged, whereas in functional ones the response is immediate. They are coextensive with the nervous system and all tissues subject to nervous control are amenable to their influence. For instance, suggestion will immediately cure a paralysis due to some mental kink, but it cannot act in the same way with a broken bone. It can, however, hasten the repair of the bone by suitably regulating the blood supply. It cannot directly influence a cancerous growth as this is parasitic and outside nerve control, but it can, and does, help to improve the health and tone of the body and assist the surrounding tissues to restrain the growth for a time. Sir W. Osler in discussing carcinoma of the pylorus states, *** "I have known a gain of ten pounds

in weight to follow the visit of an optimistic consultant." In the early nineties when Count Mattei gained notoriety as a cancer curer through the Review of Reviews, cases of certified cancer were submitted to him for treatment. Unbiased, or rather, adversely prejudiced, judges had to admit that although none of the cases had been cured many of them had considerably improved. This improvement can hardly be credited to the Count's 'coloured electricity', which was water pure and simple. So, even in such a refractory disease as cancer the mind and ^{consequently} ~~conspicuously~~ suggestion can make itself felt.

With diffidence I submit the following theory as a further explanation how mind and consequently suggestion may influence the body. To make it clear it is necessary to give the view I hold as to what vitality or organic life is. I will first define matter as the phenomena by which the forces of nature are manifested to our mind. To the various vibrations which importune it our minds 'turns them to shapes and gives to aery' something 'a local habitation and a name.' If we allow the earth was at one time in a gaseous condition, the forces which characterise certain material things, solids and liquids, were unable to manifest themselves under the conditions but were nevertheless present. The forces of nature are universal and eternal and must act in certain ways under certain conditions. Heat, light, sound, electrical energy and all the forces which 'animate' inanimate things

are derived from a universal reservoir. So to, vital force is universally and eternally present and only requires suitable conditions to be transmuted into growth, development, nerve energy and all the phenomena which characterise organic life to our senses, and there is no valid reason for looking upon these phenomena in a different light to the inorganic. It is usual to accept the forces which characterise inanimate things without the futile question of whence they came, but the force of life is not so accepted. But why should it not be so ? The vital force is universally present and given certain conditions it will manifest itself not fortuitously but inevitably in growth, reproduction and development. Recent experimenters claim to have produced life artificially. It appears quite feasible, but it can only be life in a primordial form, for to arrive at any advanced degree of organisation the experiment would require to be carried on for a few million years to allow time for development.

Life then is a manifestation of a force which is universal and upon the supply of which vitality depends. Mind again is a side issue of life, but, as we have seen exercises an influence on the vitality of the body. This influence may act by inhibiting healthful nerve stimuli, or exciting morbid ones. But if the theory of life I have given is accepted, it may act in another way, namely by cutting off the supply of vital force to the organism. It is said that some Hindus have the power of dying at will out of spite. It may be explained by their having sufficient will power to shut off their vital force supply.

Normally the instinctive desire of life is too strong to admit of complete closing of the throttle, but pain, grief, melancholia and all depressing influences may partially do so. If we allow that all mental processes even consciousness itself --- the Ego --- are the result of cell activity, and all mental aberration due to diseased physical conditions then the reduction of vital force in these conditions is still more easily explained. For if the machine be damaged it follows that the driving force cannot act to the same advantage, and if the machine be worn out or too severely damaged the animating force is unable to act at all, and the opposite forces of decay begin their work.

I would like to make it clear that the view I have given of life is not materialistic, it is idealistic. Our knowledge is strictly limited by our physical senses and the phenomena induced by them; we are cribbed, cabined, confined, but outside of this stands the Numen which we are incapable of conceiving as it possesses no physical attributes.

However unconscious suggestion may act, whether by generating or inhibiting nervous energy, or regulating the supply of vital energy, its effect is potent and all pervading. It enters into all our therapeutical measures, deluding our judgement and vitiating our conclusions. It is a more difficult task to shew how it can be eliminated,

but it should, at least, be borne in mind more than it is in observing the effect of remedies.

* British Medical Journal, 3rd Nov. 1890.

** ibid. 7th Dec. 1890.

*** Osler's Medicine, 6th Ed., Page 482.